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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CHIANG MAI 000021

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DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/MLS

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TAGS: PREL PGOV ECON SOCI TH BM

SUBJECT: CHANGE IN BURMA: NOW, OR IN THE DISTANT FUTURE?

REF: A. A) BANGKOK 340 (AMBASSADOR AND PRIME MINISTER)
1B. B) CHIANG MAI 17 (KAREN NI REFUGEE CAMP FEELING SQUEEZED)
1C. C) CHIANG MAI 2 (DEATH OF KAREN NI REFUGEE)
1D. D) CHIANG MAI 10 (STAFFDEL YEO)
1E. E) 07 CHIANG MAI 179 (REFUGEES BEMOAN EXILES)
1F. F) 07 CHIANG MAI 160 (BURMA BORDER CROSSING QUIET)

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CLASSIFIED BY: Alex Barrasso, Chief, Pol/Econ, CG Chiang Mai.
REASON: 1.4 (d)

SUMMARY

11. (C) Change will not come to Burma for another 20 years if it does not come soon, was the prevailing sentiment among Burmese exiles over lunch with the Ambassador. Though there was disagreement among the group over whether steps could be taken to help effect short-term change, and whether the post-September crackdown atmosphere represents an opportunity to do so, all agreed that failure to take concrete action now would condemn Burma to several more years of misrule. Attendees also discussed the need to find an appropriate role for ASEAN, India, China, and other regional actors. End Summary.

12. (U) Ambassador John made his first official visit to Chiang Mai January 28-29. His schedule included a call on the Chiang Mai Governor, a discussion on 175 years of U.S.-Thai relations with university students at the American Corner, and a lunch with Burmese exiles and activists. Present at the lunch were Irrawaddy Editor Aung Zaw, Aung Naing Oo and Win Min from Chiang Mai University, Christina Fink from the National Council of the Union of Burma (NCUB) Foreign Affairs Training Program, Pippa Curwen of the Burma Relief Center, Hseng Noun from the Women's League of Burma, and Zipporah Sein from the Karen Women's Organization.

When Will Change Come?

13. (C) Though there was some disagreement among the group over tactics, and whether there would be change in Burma over the short-term, all participants agreed that the future looked bleak

if change did not come to Burma shortly. There is a pervasive climate of fear, Aung Zaw and Win Min agreed, noting that a prominent Burmese economist and a monk, both known for their participation in regional conferences and book writing, were afraid of doing/saying anything that could get them into trouble. Win Min said the economist, who used to criticize the regime's policies while traveling abroad, was afraid to travel now in the wake of former UN Country Coordinator Charles Petrie's expulsion. The military rulers, Win Min added, are perpetuating the problems, instilling fear in the minds of the people. There will certainly be an explosion one day, he said, when people just cannot take it any longer.

¶4. (C) Aung Zaw opined that due to the regime's determination to stay in power, it would violently crush any demonstrations this year unless they were well-organized. Win Min agreed, noting that there was tangible and deep-seated hatred of the military over its brutal suppression of the monks, and its affront to Burma's Buddhist value system. When the monks demonstrated, they were not only reacting to economic misery, but they were also fighting for dignity, opined Aung Zaw.

¶5. (C) Aung Naing Oo asserted that many factors point to 2008 as the year of change. Even astrologers are predicting it. That said, he argued for a long-term strategy to bring about a peaceful transition, because no one knows how long Than Shwe and Maung Aye will remain in power. He emphasized the need to be on good terms with the military, since a real transition cannot happen without them, and to invest over the long-term in the reform process. Zipporah Sein agreed, noting the importance of changing the military due to the increasing poverty inside the country. Without change in the military, she stated that the people will become poorer and poorer. Aung Zaw remarked that if the military were not so inept at managing the economy, the people would not be so interested in political change.

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Regional Actors: What Can They Do, and What Can the U.S. Do?

¶6. (C) The discussion then shifted to regional dynamics, with the Ambassador noting that Thai policy on Burma had both positive and negative elements. On the positive side, he mentioned Thailand's willingness to play host to Burmese refugees, saying that he could not imagine Singapore, India, or China accepting this burden. He added that in Thailand, Burmese exiles also enjoy relative freedom of movement and can carry out their work. On the other side of the equation, the Ambassador was critical of the Thai Government (RTG) for not speaking out forcefully and publicly in support of change. (Note: Ambassador subsequently made this point in his first meeting with new Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej -- see Ref A). He noted that lobbying Thailand to divest from Burma's gas, oil, gems and timber sectors was not yet yielding results, and sought opinions on what the U.S. could usefully do to press the Thais. Pippa Curwen suggested calling the RTG's attention to the displacement caused by the construction of numerous dams on the Salween and other rivers. Aung Naing Oo questioned the utility of pressing the RTG, asserting that it has no influence over Burma's ruling junta.

¶7. (C) Aung Zaw opined that Thai society seemed more sympathetic to the plight of the Burmese in the wake of the Saffron Revolution. Hseng Noungh shared this view, noting that in the aftermath of the shooting death of a Burmese refugee (Refs B-C), Burmese organizations have positively influenced Thai media coverage of the story. Another positive development in her opinion was the increase in the number of Thai academics taking an interest in Burma. Zipporah Sein opined that an increase in the number of Thai-language publications with Burma content would help call the attention of ordinary Thai to the plight of the Burmese. Christina Fink and Aung Naing Oo

encouraged the Ambassador to press the RTG to continue to provide a safe haven for those fleeing the August-September crackdown, and to improve security for Burmese migrants, particularly in Mae Sot, where they asserted that abductions, killings and disappearances continue. Other participants expressed the view that security was not as important, saying that they believed much of the violence was gang/drug-related. (Note: On post's last three trips to Mae Sot since October 2007, none of our interlocutors expressed concern about abductions/disappearances -- see Refs D-F. End Note.)

¶8. (C) Aung Zaw and Aung Naing Oo lashed out at ASEAN, China and India for being short-sighted and claiming that Burma would disintegrate without military rule. Aung Naing Oo said they believed this because they have failed to get acquainted with opposition figures other than Aung San Suu Kyi, and that they based their comments about Burma on hearsay rather than fact. ASEAN countries and China need to look beyond her, he said, asserting that there is a support system and there are groups that will step in once a transition takes place.

Comment

¶9. (C) Increased contact with Burmese opposition groups, both inside and outside the country, would help China, India and ASEAN gain a clearer understanding of the forces behind the push for change in Burma. China has quietly taken steps to reach out to some of these groups, but India and the ASEAN countries appear less acquainted with these diverse forces.

¶10. (U) This cable has been coordinated with Embassy Rangoon.
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